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U-WIRE-04/02/2008-Harvard: COLUMN: Environmentalists should steer clear of 'Mother Nature' activism (C) 2008 Harvard Crimson Via UWIRE

By Juliet S. Samuel, Harvard Crimson (Harvard)

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. -- "We are members of the most destructive culture

ever to exist," says radical environmentalist Derrick Jensen in his first of many books about civilization's war on nature and the coming "apocalypse." Last Friday, the American enviro-activist spoke in similar terms, via webcam, to a crowd of several hundred in Saskatoon, Canada. Jensen claims to be able to forecast the imminent collapse of civilization as we know it; the only question, for him, is whether humans will survive it. In Jensen's post-apocalyptic utopia, mankind will learn from the error of its ways and go back to nature, living alongside jumping salmon and friendly bears.

The centerpiece of this doomsday vision is the idea that civilization

-- which he defines as "a way of life characterized by the growth of

cities" -- is inherently unsustainable because it requires an

ever-expanding input of resources and involves the wholesale destruction of nature. All social, technological, and political efforts to alleviate environmental problems are futile; instead, we should prepare ourselves for the fallout by learning about nature, so as to live peacefully without the squalid human world, using only "what the land gives willingly."

For one thing, Jensen willfully ignores many improvements and ambiguities in measures of environmental health: Air quality in the States has improved over the last 30 years, the release of toxic chemicals into the environment has dropped, and scientists have never been able to reliably measure water quality. His theory instead relies

on the arrogant assumption that "civilization" -- the product of

billions of individuals' decisions and actions -- can be boiled down to

one big apocalyptic bang.

But even if he were correct, there isn't much here for the well-meaning environmentalist. Jensen has nothing good to say about the ideals of the moderate green movement, of which Saskatoon can boast a strong contingent. The city, home to a large public university, is chock-full of organic-buying, bottle-recycling, hip-dressing young activists (alongside the more conservative SUV-drivers). Many of them are engaged in projects that focus on empowering individuals to make small green changes in their lives-the Saskatchewan Environmental Society, for example, provides homeowners with information about pesticide alternatives. Similary, my friend and Saskatoon host, Ellen Quigley '07, is the principal organizer of a festival focused on persuading individuals to make collective commitments to reducing their environmental impact. According to Jensen, such projects are fruitless "tweaks" to a broken system.

So why did several hundred environmentalists turn out to listen to a man who calls "mainstream" efforts to achieve sustainability "pure masturbation"? In many cases, people were just curious. Others found in Jensen a reflection of their own discontentment: As Quigley wrote me in an e-mail, "The strange thing about Derrick Jensen is that, although I think he's extreme and totally disagree with some of what he says, hearing what he has to say still makes me want to go live in a forest someplace." In other words, when Jensen talks about our alienation from nature and the commodification of all animal life, he taps into something that doesn't make sense about the way many of us live our lives.

Another part of Jensen's appeal (aside from personal charisma and his pet cat anecdotes) is that he that links up this modern disillusionment with a doctrine of apocalypse and redemption. In Jensen's eco-feminist world, "nature" stands in for the divine entity; Gaia is the force for good, the all-embracing mother in a terrible violent world. "Civilization" is the rapist, the pillager, the lustful Satan. Jensen's world gives everything meaning in the way that he taps into a feeling that many people share.

This worldview is attractive, particularly to environmentalists, because it integrates human experience into a more peaceful and attractive whole. But it is faulty precisely because it relies on this vision of the unchanging benevolence of dear Mother Nature, the idea that there was once a better state we can go back to, and that the march and downfall of civilization will one day contrive to take us back there.

But this Gaian vision is worse than a fanciful environmentalist dream; it is also a way to lay blame in the lap of others. Unsurprisingly, Jensen's favorite b te noire is "the corporations." In his world, corporations aren't just hapless profit-making machines linked up to an established social structure; they stand in for Satan's armies committed to evil for evil's sake. He talks convincingly of the futility of acting through government, but ruins the point with an unremitting focus on the extremes: "They're all Vichy governments," he declares.

Instead of rolling all our problems into one big war, in which rape and coal-mining are equivalent, those in favor of change would be (and often are) better served by careful parsing of the distinctions, by working through the possibility of unintended consequences before acting, and by drawing connections only where the evidence merits them. Most of all, we would do well to remember that acting for the environment is not like rescuing a damsel in distress; it involves dealing with multitude of physical and natural elements, all of them as implacable and indifferent as one another.

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